

“Reigniting! A sense of Vitality”

A Sermon for University Congregational Church

Sunday, August 16, 2020

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Traditional Word

8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. --2 Corinthians 4:8-10

Contemporary Word

“We must be willing to get rid of the life we’ve planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us.

--Joseph Campbell

“Reigniting! A sense of Vitality”

How wonderful that this week we are landing on “A sense of Vitality” as we explore Julia Cameron’s book on creativity called “It’s Never too Late to Begin Again”. Cameron want us to "develop a healthy sense of self-protection, that then gives us the strength and clarity we need in challenging situations." The work we've been doing this summer with "reigniting" our lives has hopefully been useful to you as we all imagine a post-COVID world--a time that we hope comes soon--where we leave the cocoons of our quarantine and move back out into the world.

It is not lost on me that my first sermon after my major surgery last month has us looking at vitality. I have spent the past month convalescing from my heart valve repair and I've had ample time to chew on this idea of vitality. The word's root is vital, which literally means "pertaining to life"--What a great topic for my first sermon after my own time spent sequestered and convalescing. A time spent building up my physical well of energy—and also my spiritual well of vitality and creativity.

We all have within us an "inner well"--a place where we draw forth our creativity and that spark of life we enjoy so much. I believe this inner well is one of the main ways where we connect with the Holy One, so for me, creativity is, by its very presence in

our lives, is an act of solidarity with the divine one. A co-creation, if you will, of the Divine presence in our lives, working with us to create--to bring forth something new into the world.

"Whenever we do something creative, we are pulling from this inner well. We have this supply of information, of images, of life experiences, of energy, this inner well--and we draw from this when we create. The act of creation then is a constant drawing from this well—and we need to find time to refill our wells! As anyone who has embarked on a creative endeavor knows, there's nothing worse than when that well runs dry.

So, Cameron's book has been about ways to reframe our lives after retirement or some other major life change and that's part of why Robin and I thought it would be good for this time—we've all had a major disruption to our lives and this is a good time to think on how we use our time.

Once we retire, or otherwise move into a time of more freedom, most of us need to learn what our author calls "Healthy Selfishness". Cameron wants us to understand that while "no longer tied to a job, we have freedom, but some of that freedom must be used on our own behalf. For many of us this is surprisingly difficult. We find ourselves only too ready to make sacrifices in the name of family, or home maintenance, or promises to (gasp) help at church, or long-deferred duties and obligations. The point is, she writes, we sometimes sacrifice our own wishes in the name of external demands.

It seems that much of what Cameron is asking us to do is to set some healthy boundaries in our lives. Except for the helping at church bit, I think she's hit the nail on the head. We don't always think of our church work as being vital—sometimes it feels perfunctory or rote—but there's a way to make all of work creative and vital—including something as possibly mundane as a church committee assignment!

Richard Rohr, yes THAT Richard Rohr, the Franciscan friar whose sister lives right here in this development behind the church and who gave us the modern insights in to the enneagram has this to say about the creative, vital spirit of Jesus: "God created each of us with particular gifts that we can discover and use in the service of co-creating a more whole and loving world. There are many parts of the Body of Christ; I am only one part, a "mouth." When I first began to teach, no one was more surprised than I was that some people valued what I had to say! If I am able to speak well, it is only because somehow, by grace, God has helped me get my false self out of the way. When we are centered in our True Self we are most in touch with our creative source and most open to be a conduit of Love.

It really is a different way of knowing, and you can recognize it by its gratuity, open-endedness, compassion, and by the way it is so creative and energizing in those who allow it.

Truly great thinkers and creatives take for granted then that they have access to a different and larger mind. They recognize that a divine flow is already happening and that everyone can plug into it. In all cases, it is a participative kind of knowing, a being known through and not an autonomous knowing. This is how we can become co-creators with our loving Creator.

The act of creation, it is said, requires an act of destruction. We have to rid ourselves of that which doesn't work to make room for our new creations. Joseph Campbell tells us that "We must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that is waiting for us." And many times this requires us to look at our lives and at the world around us and challenge our assumptions about it.

"The world is not flat, although the ancients believed it to be so. It took Magellan's voyage to prove that the world was round. Many people hold a belief as false and damning as the belief that the world is flat. They believe that they are not creative. And it is only by setting sail in the direction of their dreams that they are able to prove that the world is round.

In our Thursday morning coffee chat this past week we had an interesting discussion on the inspiration that God may or may not give us in our various acts of creation. I believe that every creative act is one drawn from the divine presence, but there are others who do not hold this to be true. There was one interesting supposition that held that God made the person creative so that the various creations could come forth from that person. And I love that! I love the theology that we do together as a community of believers. I love that our theology is not static—that it responds to the world around us—and I love that our theology is agile enough to make space for a Divine Presence that uses us for creative endeavors. And as we also discussed Thursday morning, I also love that the Holy One gave us the tool of science to help us make meaning of the world. Science tells us much about how our world works and how our lives are impacted by the natural world.

The law of entropy begins the moment we are born. It's just a simple fact of our mortality that from our first breath to our last we are in a constant state of being diminished. Entropy is slowly peeling away our lives, layer by layer, like an onion, until there is nothing left. Our lives are a constant movement from abundance to loss. And I believe it is how we respond to those losses that define us as humans.

I believe the God of creation wants us to fill our diminished space with something else, where we can, something that helps us remain vital and alive until we simply can't BE any longer. When one experiences a diminishment, say the loss of the ability to run, we need to replace it where we can. Let's say you've been a long-distance runner all of your life and now your knees just can't take the impact any more. That's a loss—that's a diminishment. I say, if possible, fill that loss with something else—something new. Power-walking—or biking. I promised myself that I will bike on my recumbent as long as I am physically able—and then when my

body can no longer do it, I will move to a different bike—perhaps a trike, even. But I will fill the space of loss with something new. Until I am unable to even do that. To me, this is what it means to be vital.

On my last trip to Nicaragua, I was waiting in the airport in Houston and the woman in front of me in our boarding line turned out to be a 93-year-old nun heading to Nica to work with a different community than we do—but similar work, nonetheless. This woman was vital and energetic and filled with kindness and love. We had a wonderful chat and she said something rather off-hand that filled me with a sense of God's presence. She said: "As long as I am of use, I hope to be useful—I pray that I can do this work until I am no longer able to do so." What a wonderful prayer for us all! May we continue to do the work of our lives until we are no longer able to do so. May we be of use—because this world needs us—this world is craving our work—and our love.

May the coming week give each of you opportunities to be of use and to share God's love with a world starved for that love. And may you find those things in your life that are vital to you and that make you feel alive. Amen

RESOURCES

Holy Bible, NRSV

"It's Never Too Late to Begin Again" by Julia Cameron